

1608/5629
A

S E R M O N

PREACHED IN THE
CATHEDRAL CHURCH OF ELY,
ON

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY the 21st, 1781,

BEING THE
DAY APPOINTED FOR A GENERAL FAST.

By CÆSAR MORGAN, M.A.

MINOR CANON AND PREACHER IN THAT CHURCH, AND LATE
FELLOW OF CHRIST COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE.

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TO THE RIGHT REVEREND

E D M U N D,

L O R D B I S H O P O F E L Y,

T H I S D I S C O U R S E

IS WITH THE GREATEST RESPECT INSCRIBED

B Y H I S L O R D S H I P's

M O S T D U T I F U L

A N D O B E D I E N T S E R V A N T

T H E A U T H O R.

1607/5629.

TO THE RIGHT REVEREND

E D M U N D

LORD BISHOP OF ELY.

THE DISCOURSE

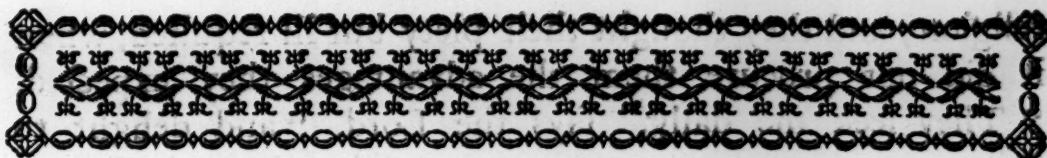
IN WHICH THE GREATEST RESPECT IS DESCRIBED

TO HIS LORDSHIP

MOST DUTIFUL

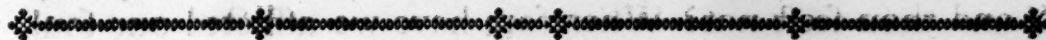
AND OBEIENT SERVANT

THE AUTHOR.



A

S E R M O N.



ISAIAH lviii. 3.

WHEREFORE HAVE WE FASTED, SAY THEY, AND THOU
SEEST NOT? WHEREFORE HAVE WE AFFLICTED OUR SOUL,
AND THOU TAKEST NO KNOWLEDGE?



THE chapter, from which the Text is taken, is with great propriety appointed for one of the Lessons to be read upon this solemn occasion; as it describes in strong and lively colours, first, what is not, and secondly, what is, a proper observance of a religious Fast, and then concludes with enumerating the benefits, which God will bestow upon all those, who perform this duty in an acceptable manner.

It appears from the Prophet, that the inhabitants of Judea at that time paid great attention to the ceremonies of
A religion;

religion; and they thought their piety but ill requited, when it did not procure them the advantages they expected. "They seek me daily," says the Lord, "and delight to know my ways, as a nation that did righteousness, and forsook not the ordinances of their God: they ask of me the ordinances of justice: they take delight in approaching to God." All the exteriors of religion are here displayed as practised by the Jews; yet we find by the sequel, they were not accepted by that God, who trieth the hearts and reins, and spieth out all our ways: for in the next verse are the words of the text: "Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not? Wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge?" Nay, so far is God from allowing them merit for those performances, that he says to the Prophet in delivering him his commission, "Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins." But the reason of this is immediately discovered. Their religion was confined to external observances: it had no effect in restraining their passions, and improving their dispositions. The same indulgence in pleasure was continued; the same practice of violence, oppression, and inhumanity was to be found amongst them, as before. The performance of the most holy ceremonies of religion, their seeking the Lord daily, and delighting to know his ways, their asking of him the ordinances of justice, and taking delight in approaching to God, appear to have had no effect in cleansing their minds from the corruption of sin. For says God, "Behold, in the day of your fast you find pleasure, and exact all your labours. Behold, ye fast for strife



“ strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness.” — “ Is it such a fast, that I have chosen? A day for a man to afflict his soul?” or, as it is more properly translated, That a man should afflict his soul for a day? (Margin of the Bible. Le Clerc. Bishop Louth.) “ Is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Wilt thou call this a fast and an acceptable day to the Lord?” The afflicting the soul for a day, which was afterwards forgotten; the bowing down the head unmeaningly like a bulrush, without humbling the soul, and subduing its inordinate affections; the spreading sackcloth and ashes under them, without mortifying their worldly lusts, were idle formalities and a mockery of God.

This nation may perhaps be thought to resemble the Jews in some of the circumstances alluded to by the prophet. As of late we have annually met upon this solemn occasion, some of us may be ready to say with the Jews, “ Wherefore have we fasted, and thou seest not? Wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge?” For so far have we been from obtaining a deliverance from our former difficulties, that new ones appear to be continually surrounding us: every year has regularly produced a fresh enemy. But let these cavillers seriously ask themselves this single question: Do they think it nothing to be so wonderfully protected against the secret machinations and open violence of so many adversaries? Then let them examine their own lives, and candidly determine, whether they have deserved even that favour at the hands of God: whether their fasts were of that nature, as to merit protection; had such

an influence on their lives and conduct, as even to intitle them to exemption from punishment.

To fast, in the literal signification of the word, means no more, than to abstain from food for a longer time, than men usually do, and is agreeable to their nature; and it is much to be feared, that too many are ready to annex the same idea to these solemn appointments. They think they have sufficiently conformed to the ordinance, and performed their duty in an acceptable manner, if they formally attend the service of the church, before they satisfy the cravings of hunger. We must not be surprized, if such fasts have little power to avert calamities, and procure us blessings. That fast, which delivered the Ninevites from the destruction, that was threatened them by the preaching of Jonah, was essentially different from such formalities. The scripture informs us, that the king commanded them to cry mightily unto God, and to turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that was in their hands. "And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said, that he would do unto them, and he did it not." (Jonah iii. 10.)

The only circumstance, that can render fasting acceptable to God, is its being made instrumental in promoting the advancement of virtue and religion. We should take that opportunity of humbling ourselves before God, of confessing our sins with the greatest contrition, and of piously resolving on an amendment of life. We should determine to search with the most exact scrutiny into the secret motives of

of all our actions, and carefully compare them with the rule of our duty, as fully laid down to us in the gospel of Christ: we should scrupulously examine, in what instances we appear to have deviated from the purity of Christianity by the commission of wickedness or a neglect of duty, that may seem to have called down this dreadful vengeance of the offended Deity, as a just punishment of our perverseness and corruption: we should humbly offer up our fervent supplications to the Father of mercies for pardon and conciliation: and resolve uniformly to adhere to our duty, notwithstanding the suggestions of some favourite passion, that may incline us to exempt it from the unalterable laws of morality and religion.

If we find, that our fasts have not procured us all the advantages, we fondly expected from them; such experience should excite us to observe them with the greater seriousness, to approach the sanctuary with the greater contrition and humility of soul, to examine our actions with more rigorous severity, and to raise our affections with the warmer devotion to the Father of spirits.

If God intends by our present difficulties to correct and reform us; there is reason to believe, that a few misfortunes cannot produce an adequate effect. They must be very great and severe calamities, that can humble the pride, moderate the dissipation, and restrain the licentiousness of a haughty, rich, and luxurious people. We complain loudly of a ruinous war, intolerable taxes, and universal poverty. But by what actions do we make it appear, that these circumstances have entered

entered deeply into our own hearts? Are we less extravagant in our pleasures, less engaged in dissipation, or more attentive to the business of our stations? The true answer, I fear, to these questions would be such, as we might well blush to acknowledge. Temperance, Oeconomy, and Industry are not the prevailing or favorite virtues of the present age.

It is, alas! to be greatly lamented, that there subsists a contest in the heart of this country of a more fatal nature, than any war, it can possibly be engaged in: I mean, a contest for superiority among all ranks of men; which is aimed at, not by a cultivation of the most generous principles, and a steady perseverance in the most praise-worthy conduct; but by the most unbounded extravagance, and the most wanton prodigality. Hence arises the anxious struggle between the Nobility and Gentry, the one party endeavouring to excel, the other to equal, their rivals. Hence it is, that some, who have inherited from their illustrious ancestors the most ample fortunes, and the most honourable titles, are obliged to submit to the most humiliating circumstances, and instead of making extraordinary exertions in the service of their country, are in reality a burden to it. To this also may in part be attributed the bankruptcies, which happen in the mercantile world. How many infatuated traders by an awkward and unbecoming display of their wealth endeavour to emulate the magnificence of princes, and by a clumsy prodigality dissipate the property, that should serve as a resource against a fluctuation of trade, the depredations of enemies, and various other incidental losses! — The excesses of those, who have most wealth, most strikingly exhibit the appearances

pearances of prodigality; but it is, I fear, proportionably great and equally pernicious in all ranks; since the fatal ambition of imitating their superiors in a vain ostentation pervades them all.

The first duty in the observance of a fast is an inquiry into our sins. This the very nature of a fast implies. It is a solemn acknowledgement of having heinously offended our Creator and Redeemer, and of hearty repentance and resolution of amendment. If we proceed not thus far, our fasting is nothing, but the mockery of a day; and our formal humiliation is as insignificant and worthless, as the nodding of a bulrush. But though to acknowledge and renounce our sins be our first duty on such solemn occasions, it is by no means our only one. A negative character is not the character to be aimed at by a christian. He must not only forsake, what is evil, but also do, what is good: he must aspire to the attainment of positive virtue.

To enumerate, and enlarge upon all the virtues, the foundations of which should be laid or increased in every breast upon such occasions, would far exceed the limits of our discourse. I shall content myself with recommending one to your attention, which is particularly dwelt upon by the Prophet Isaiah a few verses following the text, which naturally arises from the present occasion, and is forced upon our notice by some recent events.

“Is not this the Fast, that I have chosen?” says the Lord, by the Prophet; “To loose the bands of wickedness, and
“ to

“ to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go
 “ free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy
 “ bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor, that
 “ are cast out, to thy house? When thou seest the naked,
 “ that thou cover him, and that thou hide not thyself from
 “ thine own flesh?” — When in our afflictions we cry unto
 the Lord; when we pray unto him to shelter us from the
 evils, that surround us, and intreat him to turn our heaviness
 into joy, and our mourning into gladness; what disposition
 would best become such humble suppliants? Is it not
 a disposition of tenderness and humanity, a sympathetic feeling
 for the distresses of our brethren, and an earnest desire
 to mitigate or remove them? This the Prophet has expressly
 declared; and this our reason readily assents to. It would
 ill become us to apply to heaven for deliverance from difficulties,
 when we ourselves have no concern for the miseries
 of our fellow-creatures.

In all times and in all places there is a sufficient number
 of distressed objects to excite and exercise the compassion of
 the opulent. But some times particularly abound in them;
 and some calamities more powerfully apply to the feelings
 of our souls, and demand our assistance with irresistible importunity.
 Sudden and unexpected misfortunes, which no wisdom
 could foresee and guard against, and no management could prevent;
 an instantaneous transition from affluence to poverty,
 from happiness to misery, through the influence of Heaven,
 are circumstances, that touch the most unfeeling hearts;
 since they tell them in the strongest and most explicit language
 the lot of humanity; instruct them by examples,

examples, more convincing than arguments, how unstable are earthly riches, how uncertain is human happiness. Every individual shudders for himself; well knowing, that the same hand, that afflicted others, may be stretched out over his own head.

It is scarcely necessary for any of you to be informed, that what I now refer to, is the lamentable calamity, that lately overwhelmed our fellow-subjects in the West Indies. The circumstances attending it are too shocking to admit an adequate description, and too well known to need an imperfect one. The most selfish must be able to convey to his mind some idea of the unparalleled horrors of that dreadful night, when all nature appeared to be shook from its lowest foundations; when the livid flames, bursting from the clouds, successively presented the terrified inhabitants of that devoted country with a tremendous view of the devastations of the hurricane, which the darkness of the night would otherwise have concealed: when every distinction of rich and poor was at once annihilated, and the master and the slave were alike exposed to the irresistible fury of the jarring elements: when the least thought of the intire destruction of all their property found no room in *their* breasts, who were surrounded by death in so many shapes, from the hurricane, and lightening, from the inundation of the sea, and the ruins of their dwellings.

Yet, alas! this situation, dreadful as it was, little exceeded the prospect, that followed. Freed from the terrors of instantaneous death, they felt the miseries of a lingering ex-

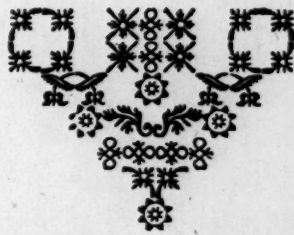
B.

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istence. The pressure of poverty to those, who till now had been used to affluence; the apprehension of famine to those, who had hitherto been fed with delicacies and fared sumptuously, was the gall of bitterness. One hope alone remained: the hope of assistance from the parent state still supports their drooping spirits. Not that they promise themselves a full restitution of all, they have lost. The destruction of property was too general to suffer them to entertain the most distant expectation of it. Present relief is all, that can be afforded them. Parliament has generously set an example: but much remains for individuals to perform. Too far removed from us for personal application, they must trust to a bare recital of their miseries, which pathetically speak to every heart, that is not quite lost to humanity, in the language of Job: "Have pity upon me, have pity upon me, " O ye my friends; for the hand of God hath touched me." (Job xix. 21.)

To be unwilling at any time to contribute something to the relief of such calamities would be unbecoming the character of men and christians; but to presume to approach the throne of grace with such flinty hearts; to apply to the compassion of the Father of all for deliverance from difficulties, with souls insensible to the severest sufferings of our fellow-christians and fellow-subjects, would be the height of impiety; an impiety, which none, I hope, who now hear me, can be charged with being guilty of. On the contrary, I trust, that all, who have it in their power, will "draw out " their soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul:" that they will contribute something, in proportion to their circum-

circumstances, towards building the waste places; that they may be called the Repairers of the breach, the Restorers of the paths to dwell in. Thus will they in the noblest manner answer the intention of this solemn appointment; and having thus resolved, they may apply to the Lord, with an humble confidence of his granting their petition, that “our
“light may rise in obscurity, and our darkness be as the
“noon day.”



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